

Nigeria's bus drivers battle mafia-controlled union and police

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An unorthodox union and an unregulated transport system leave many Nigerian bus drivers vulnerable to poverty and abuse.

Lagos, Nigeria – It is 7pm on a Wednesday in late September. Afeez* has just left a bus park at Iyana Isolo, a small busy road near the popular Ojuwoye street market in the district of Mushin.

In a leased danfo – the privately run yellow and white minibuses that serve as unofficial public transport in Nigerian cities – the 32-year-old plies through the busy streets, breaking off before traffic signals, in a rush to get his passengers to the nearby suburb of Oyingbo.

“I am in a hurry to return to the park and do more trips,” the driver explained. His conversations with passengers are terse; he has no time to listen to their complaints. “I have to deliver [the rental fee] to the owner of the bus tonight.”

The only thing momentarily slowing him down along his route are the agberos – the motor park touts he hands 100 naira (\$0.27) bills to every time he passes their junctions. Some run after the bus, demanding their due.

In Yoruba, agbero means “to carry passengers”, but this does not connote what the agberos do. These men, mostly clad in white and green uniforms but sometimes in plain clothes and carrying sticks or canes, collect dues from motorcycle, tricycle, and danfo bus drivers on behalf of the drivers’ union – a toll that allows them to pick up passengers.

The cost of dues can vary. But drivers say they generally pay three types: “booking” is paid so they can start work at the motor parks every morning; before each trip, they pay a “loading” fee, which is usually a sum equal to the fare of two passengers; and “tickets” are undefined charges which are paid once or twice a day depending on the parks they use.

Some drivers told Al Jazeera they hand over about half their daily earnings to the agberos, and altercations sometimes occur if dues are not paid.

“I have had countless fights with them, we fight often,” Afeez said. “It is trouble if you don’t give them money.”

Early in August, he was involved in a brawl with some agberos at Fadeyi, a bus stop along the route he was taking to Oyingbo.

“It was close to noon that day and the particular agbero was asking for afternoon due,” he recalled. “My conductor said it was not afternoon yet ... and that we needed to work more before paying.

“I was at the steering wheel and I heard their argument. I told him when we go on one more trip, we

would pay. The argument continued and all of a sudden he stabbed my conductor in the face with a key. He wounded him and I could not take it; I came down from the driver's seat and we fought each other."

The agbero was joined by his friends and a big fight broke out until they were all separated by other drivers, Afeez explained. "In the end, nothing happened because the chairman ... did not get involved, it was just me and their boys," he added, expressing relief that he did not encounter a union boss at the bus park.

The union

The National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) is an independent union that oversees all danfo bus drivers, commercial motorcycle drivers, and tricycle drivers.

In its own words, it "serves the interests of transport workers in the road transport sector". But according to many drivers, the union only serves itself.

Unlike regular unions, NURTW is amorphous and without a defined and transparent structure. Its membership mainly comprises people who are not drivers, but rather motor park attendants. They started off as touts, canvassing passengers onto buses and maintaining order at motor parks. But over the years they have assumed total control of Nigeria's informal transport sector.

The union has now become exclusively for "outsiders who have no business in driving", drivers told Al Jazeera, at least in part because of what some say is a troubling alliance between union leaders and state officials. One driver who identified himself as only Tunde said the top echelons of the union are people who are rewarded by politicians for their service.

The problems with the union have long been a point of national discussion. In Oyo, another state in southwest Nigeria, Governor Seyi Makinde [banned](#) NURTW "to maintain peace and tranquillity in the state in order to engender commercial and human development" following "alleged security breaches and factional clashes of the union member in some areas of Ibadan, the state capital". Since then, the state government has taken control of the bus parks in Oyo.

Some [analysts](#) say the challenges in the transport industry are rooted in the evolution of Nigeria's socioeconomic landscape, and that the steady rise in unemployment after the country's gradual economic downturn in the 1980s led to the birth of the agbero phenomenon.

Agbero originally grew out of "area boys", a slang term usually used to refer to loosely organised groups of teen street gangs. These young male residents of a particular area would casually lay claim to "ownership" of that location, extorting money from passersby and serving as informal security in the hope of some compensation. In later years, the area boys, who were already mostly unemployed, found refuge within the largely unregulated transports system, economists and public policy analysts have said. They have grown into the more sophisticated association known as agbero today.

Nigeria as a whole has no policy that guides the transport sector and in high population density cities like Lagos, with a rising scourge of unemployment and consistent migration from other states, the transport system has become a mine of quick, daily cash for young people without work.

According to Professor Gbadebo Odewumi, the dean of the school of transport at Lagos State University, the public transport system in Lagos has been infiltrated by unskilled, illiterate youths ready to do the bidding of well-known thugs at the helm of the union because the state government has refused to implement standard policy guides that have been drafted by various commissions.

"First of all, there is no policy framework. Sanity can only begin with policies. Without policies, nothing can work," Odewumi told Al Jazeera. "That is why there is this level of extortion and violence. Do you know how much the government makes per day? There is serious money in transportation. I mean billions."

Although not formally connected with the government, the union has become one of Lagos's – and much of the southwest's – social mainstays as they are a visible presence in the daily experience of millions of commuters.

A Premium Times report in 2019 said that most of the money being generated on the street is disbursed into the pockets of union leaders owing to the informal structure of the financial relations between the union and the government.

Al Jazeera approached some of the union leaders at Oshodi, a transport hub in the state, for their response to these and other claims, but they refused to comment.

"The union leaders just reap from the chaos of the system and enrich themselves," Odewumi said.

"The relationship is parasitic; each component is taking advantage of the other with the drivers at the base. The government takes advantage of the union and uses them for what they want, like using them to challenge political opponents during elections; the union takes advantage of the drivers."

'You are at their mercy'

"As a driver, I am in the union because the union is for those who are transport workers like me," said Muyideen*, a danfo driver and father-of-three who ferries passengers from motor parks in Mushin and Oshodi every day.

"What is sad is what the union has become."

The 61-year-old has a diploma in business administration but began working as a driver in 2001 after he could not find a job in his field. Now he is on the road from 5.30am to 9pm every day. But his income, he said, averages just 5,000 nairas (\$13) a day.

"I am a father of three grown children and I need to struggle to make sure they don't end up with this kind of job," Muyideen said. "They need to go to school and be well-off; this is not what I want for them. Not all drivers are illiterates as people think, I am a graduate but due to unemployment, I found myself in this job."

He has grown weary of the shady, unaccounted charges he pays the union for every trip he makes. The charges are not official and could be invented at any time, he lamented. And his inability to challenge the exorbitant levies, he said, lies in the free rein the government has given the union leadership to operate public transport in Lagos state.

"The union is mainly for thugs and the government is not doing anything about it. Nothing is being done with the dues we pay, we just pay," he said.

Muyideen starts out every morning paying a 1,700 nairas (\$4.59) booking fee at the motor park, and the dues pile up from there. Although he can make about 700 nairas (\$1.89) from a single trip at full capacity, before he is able to pocket the cash, between 200 and 300 nairas (\$0.54-0.81) – almost half – go to the agberos.

"Once you are driving [in public transport] in Lagos, you are at their mercy. Drivers are silently

suffering because most of the reward of our labour goes to them,” he said, pointing to a union official lounging on a bench on the other side of the road.

“And you cannot do anything. They can do whatever they want at any time,” he said, dejectedly, before looking around to see if it was his turn in the queue. “If you fight them, you will suffer for it. You will either be beaten or be sent away from the park.”

Informal transport sector

Lagos, Nigeria’s economic capital, is the most populated state and also its smallest. Public transport accounts for 98 percent of the traffic in the state according to Professor Odewumi, but the system is “chaotic and terribly organised”, he explained.

Nigeria’s public road transport system is predominantly informal and that part of the sector is largely regulated by the NURTW. According to the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA), there are 75,000 minibuses in the state and 50,000 tricycles according to a 2020 report by Techcabal.

In 2008, the government tried to improve Lagos’s formal transport sector with the introduction of the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) system. However, there are just 474 BRT buses available and they only work on main highways. The BRT system does little to meet the demands of the eight million commuters who use the road network in the metropolis daily.

BRT buses, with off-board ticket purchase, only have a capacity of 40 to 85 passengers and are usually more expensive than the minibuses. They use dedicated lanes on main highways so do not have the flexibility in routes of the minibuses.

That is why many passengers choose commercial shared transport like danfo or smaller tricycles that carry a driver and just two passengers.

Tricycles, popularly known as maruwa or keke, are used to navigate feeder routes and penetrate the inner crevices of the city by using the streets rather than main roads. Tricycle riders are also governed by NURTW and are subject to the same demands as danfo drivers, only they pay a cheaper toll as they carry fewer passengers.

A series of misfortunes

One morning in August when the lockdown had just been lifted, tricycle rider Yusuf Hassan decided to help two middle-aged women who could only afford to split a single passenger fare between them, by letting them share one seat. Locally, this is called lapping, where one passenger carries another on their lap – and Yusuf understood that it did not contravene regulations because even though there were three passengers, only two seats were occupied.

He was halfway through the trip when another tricycle with three policemen approached and stopped him. “Before I knew it, they were all over me. The three of them speaking at once, accusing me of disobeying the state government’s regulations.”

He said they ignored his explanations, seized his keys and pushed him out of the vehicle, taking it to their police station in Mushin.

“When I got to the station, they refused to attend to me, saying I had violated the law. It wasn’t until I involved a union executive ... that they bothered to attend to me and they said I had to pay 10,000 naira [\$27.02] before it could be released to me.”

The amount was reduced after a union representative negotiated on his behalf, and Yusuf finally paid 4,000 nairas (\$10.81) to get his tricycle back, because it was all the money he had.

When asked if the union had helped him pay the fine, he shook his head. "Which union?" he smirked. "The executive was only there to talk to the policemen, to negotiate the bribe. His presence only helped reduce it."

The police seize vehicles instead of arresting drivers for these offences, he said. "Why would they arrest you? They need the money, not you. So it is your bus or tricycle that will be driven to their station."

This was the first of a series of "misfortunes" that Yusuf says has affected his business. In the middle of September, he misjudged a traffic signal which seemed to malfunction and moved ahead.

"All of a sudden, I noticed I was being chased with a motorcycle," he said. It was a plain-clothes policeman, but instead of stopping, Yusuf sped off, and a chase ensued.

"I thought if he chased me for some minutes, he would let me go but we both kept going and going. And he was faster, being on a motorcycle. When I knew I did not stand a chance, I looked for a place where there were a lot of people by the roadside and parked the tricycle there."

Yusuf beckoned passersby to help him, and some tried to reason with the officer, saying the young driver, who is in his 20s, was a relative of theirs. Finally, the policeman agreed not to arrest him, but called him aside and insisted on some money instead.

"He said I had to pay 15,000 naira (\$40.54) for him not to take my tricycle." Again, Yusuf was able to negotiate, eventually paying 3,000 nairas (\$8.1) on the spot.

"Up till now, I can say I have not fully recovered because the series of arrests interrupted my plan and I can't pay back the microfinance," Yusuf explained, referring to the 970,000 nairas (\$2,622) loan he had to take to buy his tricycle.

He pays back 17,000 nairas (\$46) weekly. But more than a year later, he is yet to pay it off.

"There is no sense in working for the police because that is what it is," he added about the fines and bribes.

Threats from law enforcement

Although most commercial drivers centralise at motor parks, there are some who choose not to, and instead, drive around the city looking for passengers. Although this reduces their dues to the union, it also has challenges, Afeez explained.

These drivers still pay the agberos who stop them along the way, and they are more at risk of getting unwanted attention from law enforcement. "They [police] don't come into the parks to arrest drivers, only outside on the road," he said, explaining that the parks offer drivers at least some protection.

Drivers complained about problems with law enforcement agencies like the Lagos State Traffic Management Agency (LASTMA), Vehicle Inspection Service (VIS), the police and the government's Task Force.

The Lagos State Environmental Sanitation and Special Offences (Task Force) was created in 1991 by military edict when Brigadier General Raji Rasaki was the military governor of Lagos state. Over

time, the edict has been redesigned for various purposes which now includes arresting and prosecuting “violators of the provision of the Road Traffic Law 2012”. Among the drivers, the task force has become widely [notorious](#) for arbitrary arrests and huge bribes the officers demand.

“You want to talk about the task force? Where do you want to begin because there are a lot of things to say,” Afeez said, sitting in a leased danfo at the park in Iyana Isolo one rainy Tuesday. Despite his numerous encounters, one stands out because it cost him the most.

“It was the task force that made me lose my former bus,” he said, explaining that it was seized and he was arrested three times in the space of three weeks in August and September. He had to spend all his earnings extricating himself from either task force or LASTMA officials – as well as paying 8,000 nairas (\$21.6) to get the bus back – which meant he was unable to make payments to the owner and lost the bus.

“We are often arrested because there are no designated bus stops along this route, so we usually use the roadside to drop and sometimes pick [up] passengers. But that is considered an offence,” Afeez explained, saying that officials were “very aggressive” and there was no way to talk to them about the charges.

“Sometimes they beat drivers; a lot of drivers who challenge them have been beaten,” he said.

Afeez started driving 10 years ago but has never owned a bus of his own. He has been on the streets fending for himself through odd jobs since he was a teenager, but managed to take out longer leases on buses in the past. Now, after losing the certainty that came with the previous bus, he rents vehicles on a day-to-day basis; on days he cannot find one, he does not get to work.

“I don’t have my own now, so I look out for friends who may not be driving on a particular day and use their bus to work. I pay them after work,” he said.

The last arrest left a mark on him. He is now afraid because he cannot afford to be arrested with a borrowed bus. He splayed his palm on the dashboard in resignation. “We work in fear; it is as though we are thieves. We are always on the lookout for task force, the police and LASTMA officials; you never can tell which one is around.”

Muyideen also fears law enforcement officials – even more than he does the union. When asked why, he said the fines they demand are far higher than what the union will collect if he is arrested.

Several drivers from different routes have also alleged that Task Force officers use agberos they personally employ as decoys, to make arrests. “They [Task Force officials] are government thugs,” Muyideen lamented.

“The enforcement agency is a hopeless thing. Who will enforce the law?” Professor Odewumi said. “Any laws made, rather than the enforcers looking to enforce them, they are looking to exploit them. Anytime in the day, 70 to 80 percent [of the enforcers] are on the road not enforcing anything but collecting money.”

Muyiwa Adejobi, a superintendent of police and the public relations officer for Lagos Police Command, responded to the allegations about “decoys” in a phone interview with Al Jazeera.

“Using decoy by the police force is not a problem. It is acceptable in the force. Not all personnel in the task force are police officers, there are also paramilitary personnel [that work in the task force],” Adejobi said.

“In fact, according to the law [Administration of Criminal Justice Act of Lagos], even individuals are permitted to arrest offenders; the only thing is you can’t detain the offenders.”

“Although, we have deviants within the police force ... we have said it and we reiterate that we have zero tolerance for corruption. It takes two to tango ... the drivers should stop giving bribes to the police officers. We have told them to identify the [erring] Task Force officers and report them to the [disciplinary] mechanism we have set up in the police force,” he added.

A history of violence

According to Odewumi, the union is loosely organised and populated by people who have a history of violence and, as a result, politicians have been able to utilise them as political tools for their own agendas.

Often, riots that have broken out in the ranks of the NURTW have caused widespread vandalism and the killing of innocent people. These riots are usually the result of an internal leadership tussle in the motor parks.

“They could be violent. Their number can unleash violence,” Odewumi said.

The union is registered under the National Labour Congress (NLC) and as such is subject to government oversight through the ministry of transport. While the relationship between the NURTW and the ministry is not entirely clear, the political links between politicians and top union leaders [are known](#) and usually manifest during elections.

“Agberos have become political. They can determine who becomes the commissioner or governor. During elections, who will be used to snatch ballot boxes and disrupt the electoral process?” Odewumi said. “They are now political tools, the instrument of winning elections. That is the problem.”

The commissioner for transport in Lagos State, Frederic Oladeinde, was contacted for a comment on this article, but he was unable to speak “due to the lack of clearance by the state’s Ministry of Information” for him to talk to the press at the time.

When Al Jazeera visited his office in Ikeja, Lagos, on August 31, 2020, an interview was not given due to the aforementioned reason. Subsequent calls and emails directed to the deputy director of public affairs at the ministry of transport were not acknowledged.

Strengthen the 98 percent

Numerous attempts have been made to modernise Lagos’s ailing public transport system over the years, including things like the imported, modernised BRT system. But the implications of this for public drivers and passengers are increased route restrictions and rising fares.

“It is laughable when you say you want to eradicate the carrier of the 98 percent. We should regularise and modernise the buses, rather spending the millions of dollars spent on psychedelic ones which make no impact,” Odewumi told Al Jazeera.

“With all those innovations, they are just impressing themselves. The idea is to phase out agbero and danfo drivers but it won’t work. The government should rather strengthen the carrier of 98 percent [buses and tricycles] and provide a framework for it to operate efficiently,” Odewumi added.

“The yellow [danfo] buses have higher frequency than the BRT, they are more flexible and move into

routes that the large BRT cannot move into, they adapt with demands. The highly modernised buses have no taproot in our technology.”

Tricycle driver Yusuf used to work as a barber before he decided to venture into public driving. He thought it would help him make a better living.

One year after starting, he has changed his route due to the increasing charges demanded by the union and the police along his former route. Frustrated with the official rule changes made during the pandemic that greatly affected the transport business, he is considering changing jobs again.

“At the end of the day you check the money you have earned and you see it is nothing. You ask yourself if this is all I have worked for since daybreak,” Yusuf bemoaned.

“On days that I wake up late, I always decide not to go to work again. I must start working as early as 6:30am to meet up the demands of the union and earn something tangible for myself. If I start work by 8am, I can’t meet [targets] for the rest of the day.

“You pay the union in the morning, afternoon and evening ... And sometimes you don’t even know the reason, you just pay.”

While the likes of Yusuf, Afeez and Muyideen work daily to eke out a meagre living for themselves and their families, union leaders live [lavish](#) lives. The income generated from the dues they collect cements their place among the socialites of Lagos.

“Almost all the money you make from this business leaves you in the end,” Muyideen said.

“You take a bus on hire purchase and pay back to the owner, you pay agebro, you pay the police and others, you buy petrol ... repair the bus and – in the end – only little remains.”

** Names have been changed to protect the drivers’ identities.*

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